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The Walkers & the Code Of Betrayal

BREAKING THE RING

By John Barron

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By Frank Uhlig Jr.

Governments have always had secrets, and treason has long disfigured the history of mankind. Until the technological age, however, governmental secrets were comparatively few, as were the number of those who needed to know them to do their jobs. But now secrets are numerous. So are the people who need to know them. Chief Warrant Officer John A. Walker Jr. was one such person. So were his brother Arthur, his son Michael and his associate Jerry Whitworth. All were in the Navy.

John Barron's brief, simply written and fast-paced "Breaking the Ring" tells us the story both of John Walker's family of traitors and the men from the FBI who hunted them. Unfortunately, it seems Barron had only enough material to make a long article. Perhaps for that reason, he has shamelessly padded his book with accounts of other espionage cases and of old battles. These accounts are not always accurately drawn. Still, the book reads well enough, and it places in one set of covers all we are likely to know, or want to know, about John, Michael, Arthur and Jerry.

As a teen-ager, John Walker was a clever petty criminal who, given a chance to make something of himself in the Navy, took that chance. It led him into radio communications, where he did well, rising from seaman through petty officer and chief petty officer to the ranks of the warrant officers.

With ships and forces flung across the globe, the only means of communication among them all is radio. But since anyone can listen in on such

communications, radio communications must be transmitted in code. The making and breaking of codes is old stuff, but in our century the skills involved and the time and wealth required to make and break them have grown enormously.

But there is an easier and more certain way to capture an enemy's secrets than through enormous intellectual effort and the use of expensive machines. That easier way is to buy them.

John Walker was one of the many people who had not only the secret knowledge, but also the keys with which the rest of the U.S. Navy's secrets could be unlocked. While Barron does not make plain what Walker's original motive was, clearly Walker liked excitement and lusted for the "good life." He knew the value of what had been entrusted to him. He approached the Soviets and soon made a deal. The Russians got the electronic keys to the U.S. Navy's operational and materiel cupboards; in exchange, Walker got the money to buy the things he considered necessary to live the good life.

When, in order to avoid detection, Walker found it necessary to retire from the Navy, he brought in another radioman, Jerry Whitworth, with whose help he could continue his operations. Whitworth, in turn, was succeeded by Walker's son Michael. Along the way Walker brought in his brother, a retired naval officer who helped swell the family income.

Just as the Navy needed secrecy for its communications, so did John Walker and the members of his ring need it for theirs. While Walker had easily led his brother and son into treason, he could lead neither his wife nor his daughter. Both were estranged from him and both knew his secret, but neither was able to reveal that activity to the FBI until 1984, 16 years after Walker had begun his treason.

As for the secrets that remain, the Navy and the rest of the government have to solve the problem of protecting them. How well will they do it? Let us hope we never find out by reading another story like this one.

The reviewer is publisher of the Naval War College Review and editor of "Vietnam: The Naval Story."